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SUBJECT: DOMINICA CABINET RESHUFFLE AMID CORRUPTION CONCERNS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires D. Brent Hardt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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11. (SBU) Dominica Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit announced on November 19 a cabinet reshuffle designed to curb allegations of widespread corruption among his cabinet ministers. The reshuffle fueled speculation among the opposition that early elections are likely to be announced for the middle of 2009. The opposition parties hope to ride to power on the back of growing concerns over corruption and ineffectual government policies, amid concerns that the global economic downturn will negatively affect Dominica's fragile, tourism dependent economy. End summary.

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Cabinet Reshuffle; Housing Minister Fired for Corruption  
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2.(U) On Wednesday November 19, Dominica's Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit announced a cabinet reshuffle designed to curb allegations of widespread corruption among this senior cabinet officials. Radio news reported that Skerrit dropped public utilities Minister Ambrose George from his cabinet. George had been under pressure to resign over allegations that he was linked to the November, 2007 grant of an offshore banking license to Private Capital Bank and an alleged attempt by ruling Democratic Labor Party operatives to extract money from the new bank for party and private pursuits. Skerrit did not refer to the claims in his address to the nation. He spoke briefly of the need for the country to adhere to acceptable standards of governance, and announced he would move Education Minister Vince Henderson into the Foreign Minister portfolio.

13. (U) Minister of National Security Rayburn Blackmoore was transferred to George's Ministry of Public Works, while the PM himself picked up the national security portfolio. In other ministries, Senator Sonia Williams was appointed Minister of Education, Sports, Human Resources and Youth Affairs. Dr. Eisenhower Douglas, the former permanent secretary in the Ministry of Community Development, Culture, information and Gender affairs, was promoted to be the new Director of Trade in the Ministry of Trade, Industry, Consumer and Diaspora affairs. The other ministers were kept in their previous positions.

14. (U) Opposition leaders were quick to dismiss the reshuffle as "too little and too late". Judith Pestania, head of the Dominica Freedom Party (DFP), asked in a press conference: "Was Ambrose dismissed as Minister because he was tired, stale and tainted, or is the PM accusing his entire cabinet of being tired, stale or tainted, which is why he had to bring in Sonia Williams into cabinet? We in the DFP remain

unconvinced that the matter has been fully addressed and the government is being far from transparent and accountable." Ron Green of the United Workers' Party echoed Pestania's sentiments, questioning the timing of the reshuffle and wondering why the national security portfolio was being taken away from Minister Blackmoore.

15. (C) The opposition also used the reshuffle and growing concerns of corruption in government as a rallying point, staging several public rallies denouncing the government for allegedly tolerating widespread corruption among the senior members of government. Embassy contacts pointed out that the newly formed Public Integrity Commission (PIC), is a step in the right direction but is insufficient to beat back the pressures coming from narco-traffickers to influence government ministers. Former attorney general Bernard Wiltshire noted that, with the collapse of the banana industry following Hurricane Dean, farmers are widely cultivating marijuana, and drug trafficking linked to Venezuelan narco-traffickers is widespread and growing. Wiltshire also asserted that many gangs have started coming into Dominica, many of them linked to Jamaican organized crime families.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) The removal of Blackmoore from the National Security portfolio is definitely addition by subtraction. In a meeting with the Embassy's Law Enforcement Working Group the day before his reassignment, Blackmoore seemed at best oblivious to the problems in Dominica's security infrastructure, and at worst self-serving and arrogant. He was clearly unaware he was about to lose his job, and spent most of a two-hour meeting blaming other ministries and the police chief for the gains made by narco-traffickers in Dominica, denying his own responsibility, and asking the USG to donate another 60-foot patrol boat to replace the one Dominica has cannibalized. Skerrit's assumption of national security duties cannot but improve the situation, especially as responsibility for the issues will now be placed squarely in his lap and thus encourage more attention to the problems, though they will now have to compete with the many issues on his Prime Ministerial agenda.

17. (C) Henderson's appointment to the Foreign Minister's portfolio is likewise probably a net positive. Although very sure of himself and protocol-conscious, Henderson has proven a competent manager in Education, and has worked with us on a number of programs -- most notably on the Centers for Excellence in Teacher Training project with USAID. He is also very close to Skerrit -- both attended university in New Mexico under USG-funded scholarships -- so should be in close alignment with his PM on foreign policy issues.

HARDT